DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 135 261 FL 008 449

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TITLE Southern White English: The Changing Verb Phrase.
PUB DATE 30 Dec 76
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Linguistic Society of America Winter Meeting (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Dec., 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age; *American English; Descriptive Linguistics; *Dialect Studies; Interviews; Language Patterns; Language Research; *Language Variation; *Phrase Structure; *Regional Dialects; Social Influences; Sociolinguistics; Structural Analysis; *Verbs
IDENTIFIERS *Alabama (Anniston)

ABSTRACT

In a sociolinguistic study of the verb phrase in Southern White English, a pattern of change in progress was observed. The 14 variables studied showed that certain variants were increasing, others decreasing, and yet others stable across time within the community, and that each variable's change was progressing in a wave sensitive to age, social class, sex, and rural/urban origins. It is possible that these apparent changes were a reflection of age grading, since there are no earlier records of speech in that community. However, the variants that are decreasing are all older forms of English than those which are increasing and are dying or nonexistent outside Southern White and Black English. This suggests that age grading is not the primary factor here, but rather language change moving through the community. The variables examined were the standard and nonstandard variants of NP plural agreement; plural "was," "is"; singular "don't"; irregular preterits and past participles; "ain't"; negative concord; passive "be" and "got"; perfective "done"; "a+verb+ing"; double modals; "liketa"; and negative inversion. The data base consisted of tape-recorded interviews with 65 natives of Anniston, Alabama, and nearby rural areas. The informants were teenagers and adults over 65 of the working and upper classes. (Author/AM)

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SOUTHERN WHITE ENGLISH: THE CHANGING VERB PHRASE

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LSA Winter Meeting, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, December 30, 1976

Evidence from various studies such as those by Labov in 1965 and by Labov, Yeager, and Steiner in 1972 have shown very clearly that phonological change in progress can be observed and that it can lead to support or rejection of assumptions and hypotheses about language change.[1] In a recently completed sociolinguistic study of the verb phrase in Southern White English--as it is found in one town in Alabama--I found possible evidence of change in progress in the grammar of that town. Moreover, the change observed seemed to be progressing in a wave sensitive to age, social class, sex, and rural/urban origins as suggested by C.-J. Bailey (1973).

Methodology

My study was of the whites of Anniston, Alabama, my home town. Anniston is a small city of nearly 60,000 (in its metropolitan area) located about a hundred miles due west of Atlanta. The part of my work to be discussed here was based on tape recorded interviews with 77 people. The ten categories were proportioned as seen in Table 1. The sample was divided into the following categories: male/female; teenagers/ older people (65 years old and above); upper class/ working class; and older working class people of rural background. Except for the rural informants, everyone was a native of Anniston or had moved there by the age of six. The rural people were from the nine contiguous counties around Anniston.

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WORKING CLASS

	URBAN		RURAL	TOTAL
	Teenagers	Over 65	Over 65	
Female	7 (7)	8 (6)	8 (8)	23
Male	8 (7)	7 (6)	7 (7)	22
				45 (41)

UPPER CLASS

Female	11 (6)	7 (6)		18
Male	8 (6)	6 (6)		14
				32 (24)

TABLE 1. Population of sample. Number of persons interviewed by age, sex, social class, rural/urban. Subset of sample: ( )

I interviewed all the informants myself following an interview schedule rather roughly. The interview was designed to elicit demographic information, to set the informant at ease, and to get him to talk as much as possible.

The part of the grammar studied was the verb phrase. The topics examined included tense and mood, aspect, modality, agreement, and negation. These can be broken down into 14 variables: 9 quantitative variables, 5 qualitative variables. The quantitative variables were counted as occurring in either their standard or their nonstandard forms. The totals for the social group under consideration--working class teenage girls, for example-- can be stated as a percentage of nonstandard forms out of the total number of occurrences, standard and nonstandard. For instance, the older rural working class women used <u>don't</u> rather than <u>doesn't</u> for the third person singular 12 times out of 12 possible times, that is, 100% of the time. This kind of quantification is illustrated in Table 2. Somewhat more slippery are the variables for which it was too difficult--or uninteresting--to define an alternate

	OVER 60				TEENAGE	
	Rural		Urban		Urban	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Boys	Girls
DECREASING						
nonstandard irregular preterit	34	27	20	23	22	12
invariable *was*	96	98	74	77	79	48
invariable *is*	70	46	42	38	34	27
NP plural + *-s*	42	81	38	59	27	10
negative concord	88	75	69	84	70	60
INCREASING						
passive *got*	27	25	29	28	80	77
STABLE						
invariable *don't*	100	100	69	91	94	98
nonstandard irregular past participle	31	37	31	30	34	32
ERRATIC						
ain't	42	50	41	34	61	19

TABLE 2. Language change in Anniston area among working class: 9 quantitative variables. Percent use of nonstandard variant by age/class/sex/urban-rural cell. Based on subset of interviews.

variant, such as double modals. For these variables only a qualitative analysis of the data was carried out. (See Table 3.) That is, the number of times the item was used in the interviews was totalled by social group. Then the percentage of the group who used the form at least once could be stated: A fourth of the old rural working class women used double modals during their interviews, as shown in (a) of Table 3. Alternatively, the average number of instances per interview hour, by social group, could be established. This is shown in the (b) figures of Table 3. For instance, the older working class rural women used a double modal once in every two hours of interviews. From these kinds of quantification, it was possible to make certain comparisons of the various social groups.

The particular variables under discussion are illustrated here for the benefit of those unfamiliar with Southern speech.

First, the quantitative variables, beginning with invariable is, was, and don't, as in the first three examples:

(1) Invariable is:

I just help out while they's in a rush.

(2) Invariable was:

Was you a majorette?

(3) Invariable don't:

He don't know anything, does he?

A fourth variable was NP plural + -s as in

(4) My two great-grandchildren that lives at Oxford loves games better'n anything.

Two more are nonstandard irregular preterit and past participle:

(5) My daddy, I never knowed or seen of him doin' it, naw sir!

		OVER 60				TEENAGE	
		Rural		Urban		Urban	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Boys	Girls
DECREASING							
a+verb+ing	(a)	71	87	71	85	12	42
	(b)	(3.4)	(9.6)	(1.2)	(6.1)	(.2)	(.13)
STABLE							
perfective	(a)	28	75	57	85	37	42
done	(b)	(.98)	(1.5)	(1.12)	(2.06)	(2.04)	(.5)
liketa	(a)	14	37	23	100	25	71
	(b)	(.16)	(.65)	(.48)	(1.37)	(.2)	(1.4)
double	(a)	0	25	28	71	25	0
modals	(b)		(.52)	(.16)	(.4)	(.4)	
negative	(a)	71	12	0	28	37	14
inversion	(b)	(.98)	(.13)		(.17)	(1.42)	(.1)

TABLE 3. Language change in Anniston area among working class: 5 qualitative features.
(a) Percent of group using features at least once.
(b) Average number of instances of form per interview hour by group.

(6) He told her that she was eat up with cancer.

Three more are ain't, multiple negation (negative concord), and passive got:

(7) They ain't got no business a-leavin' this earth a-goin' into God's territory.

(8) I wouldn'a had no railroad man under no circumstance.

(9) Well, we started to come out to Wellborn tonight, but we thought we might get cut up or somethin' like that.

The qualitative variables were a+verb+ing (prefixed present participle), perfective done, double modals, liketa, and negative inversion:

(10) Prefixed present participle:

Yeah, he's gon wind up behind the eight-ball, that McCord, but he's a-tellin' the truth!

(11) Perfective done:

You buy you a little milk and bread and you've done spent your five dollars.

(12) Double modals:

Course, I might not could resist it.

(13) Liketa:

An' they pulled it open and liketa beat that old woman to death!

(14) Negative inversion:

I don't bother nobody and ain't nobody gon come to my door here and bother me.

Results

Through carrying out the type of work just described, I discovered the following about Southern White English as found in Anniston, Alabama.

Out of the 14 variables examined for possible change in progress, there is clear evidence of change going on in half of them in the working class. This can be seen mainly by comparing the two working class age groups--the teenagers and the elderly, but also by comparing rural/urban and sex differences among the working class. The upper class showed so little variation from the standard that no change can be observed except for passive _got_. With that exception, the upper class will not be mentioned further.

The 7 variables showing a strong difference between the older urban working class and the teenage working class were multiple negation, invariable _is_ and _was_, NP plural + -_s_, nonstandard irregular preterit, prefixed present participle, and passive _got_. (See Tables 2 and 3.) Combining data for both sexes, the older urban working class had 49% NP plural with -_s_; the teenagers had 16%. The older people had 76% invariable _was_; the teenagers had 57%. For the nonstandard irregular preterits, the older had 22%, the teenagers 15%. And so on. Going in the opposite direction, the older people had passive _got_ 28% of the time, while the teenagers had it 72% of the time. In 4 of these /, a contrast can be seen between the rural and urban older people of the working class: invariable _was_ and _is_, nonstandard irregular preterit, and prefixed present participles. Combining the sexes again, but referring only to the older people, the rural men and women had 97% invariable _was_, the urban, 76%. For nonstandard irregular preterits, the rural had 30% compared

with 22% for the urban. For 2 of these 4, invariable was and nonstandard irregular perterit, the teenage working class girls are much more standard than the working class boys of their age. For 4 of the 7 items that are changing, the urban and especially the rural older show a sex difference, though there is no consistent directionality. These items are negative concord, invariable is, NP plural + -s, and prefixed present participle. The urban women were more nonstandard than the men for negative concord, but the rural men were more nonstandard than the rural women for the same feature. The rural men are more nonstandard than the women for invariable is, while the women are more nonstandard than the men for NP plural agreement and prefixed present participles. These details are shown in Table 3.

This still leaves half of the variants showing little or no change through time. This is certainly the case for invariable don't, nonstandard irregular past participles, perfective done, and liketa. It also seems to be the case for double modals and negative inversion, though there were really too few cases (15 double modals, 19 negative inversions) to draw any firm conclusions. While ain't showed no change in time, it was so erratic that it was put in a class by itself.

Thus, to a limited extent, change can be seen moving through the whole working class community, from the teenage girls, the most 'advanced', to the teenage boys, to the urban men and women, to the rural men and women who are the most conservative. This is illustrated especially well by the nonstandard irregular preterit where the older rural people have the most old fashioned and nonstandard usage, while the teenage girls have the least.

Discussion

How is it, though, that I can say that these seven items are changing in time and are not simply cases of age grading?

Differences between age groups present a problem when there is no earlier evidence from the community, as is the case here. In support of age grading (Hockett 1950), it can be argued that the older are freer of social constraints because of their age and can therefore use stigmatized forms more freely than the young. They know that social mobility is no longer possible for them; the teenagers feel that they can rise socially if they want to. Also, older people tend to become re-integrated into their own community, returning to their own roots; conversely, teenagers are trying to pull away from the ties of family and community. Moreover, the older informants generally had less education than the teenagers who were all high school students. But the increase in education is part of the historical and social context which is influencing the development of the language, so even though it might be a factor in age grading it is also a part of change in progress. The real problem lies in the questions of the freedom from social constraints and re-integration into the community experienced by older people.[2] I have no information which would resolved these problems. The best solution, of course, would be to study the same community again in fifty years. In the meanwhile, I have assumed that the six features which are decreasing are older forms which are dying out and that the single feature which is increasing is a new form which is coming in. For the older forms, it is possible to

check in various reference works such as the OED or Visser. I will discuss each of those in turn.

Although there is a great variety of nonstandard irregular preterits in American English, Atwood noted in 1953 that "by far the greater number of [these] forms...are of Early Modern English origin, and are more or less fully attested...in the written language of the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, as well as in the modern British dialects." (1953:42) He goes on to say that "a good many other forms that are not recorded, or not unambigously documented, in Early Modern English have been observed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British dialects, and may very well have been current in the British speech of our colonial period." (1953:42)

As for invariable *is* and *was*, and NP plural _ *-s*, Visser shows that plural subjects with singular verbs, aside from collective nouns, "occur in all periods of English... The great number of examples in the 16th and 17th centuries, especially with *is* and *was*, is so remarkable that one gets the impression that the idiom was regarded as quite regular at the time, and perhaps also in the preceding centuries." (Visser 1963:I,1;71) Concerning the source of the verbal ending in *-s* for plural subjects, Visser says that it "was originally a feature of Northern English which in the course of time gradually spread to the south not only in popular and colloquial [speech] but also occasionally in the literary language... It became obsolete in the literary language about the middle of the 17th century while living on in a number of dialects." (1963:I,1;72)

Multiple negation or negative concord has always existed in Entlish. It was very common but generally not obligatory in Old

English. It was especially, but not exclusively, used for emphasis. By the time of Shakespeare it was used largely in coordinate sentences and phrases. After 1700 it was rarely found in standard English, except in coordinations. (See Traugott 1972: 95,148,179)

While there is disagreement as to the precise origin of the prefixed present participle, it is certainly an older form, current from around 1500 to 1700 (Traugott 1972:165) and still widely used in British dialects.

The use of get rather than be for the passive seems to be an innovation.[3] It is the only example in this study of change from below, that is, below the level of social awareness (Labov 1965: 110). It also provides an example of hypercorrection from below in which the young carry a variable further along the process of change (Labov 1965:111). Moreover, it is the only case in this study where a form can be observed spreading from the working class to the upper class. The use of got passive increases from the least occurrence among the older upper class to the most among the working class boys. The order--from least to most--is as follows: upper class men and women--13%; rural working class men and women--23%; urban working class men and women--28%; upper class girls--35%; upper class boys--57%; working class girls--77%; working class boys--80%. This is probably a reflection of a change taking place throughout American English, but since there is no stigma attached to the use of got passive, it is unlikely that any such change has been noticed elsewhere.

Summary

Probably the best interpretation of the results of this study of Alabama White English is provided by the wave model of language change, showing the movement through the working class community of increasing standardization or innovation (in the case of get passive), and of maintenance of stability. As discussed above in regard to the forms which are decreasing, all the nonstandard features (except for get passive) appear to be relics of older forms of English.

The six working class groups can be taken as six points on a time-space scale, with the older rural men or women having the earliest forms and the teenage girls having the latest forms, so far as the working class is concerned. As C.-J. Bailey explains,

> The wave is different for each relative time. Relative times are defined on minimal (isolectal) changes. Each new 'point' in social space results from 'crossing' a single social barrier, i.e. from a single difference in social characteristics resulting from differences in age, sex, social class, ethnic groupings, etc. including the urban/rural difference. (1973:69)

Tables 2 and 3 show the movement through time and space for the 14 variables discussed here, showing very graphically the death of NP plural + -s and the prefixed present participle and the sudden upsurge of passive get. Less dramatic is the demonstration of the gradual reduction of invariable is and was, and nonstandard irregular preterit, as well as the stability of invariable don't, negative concord, nonstandard irregular past participles, perfective done, liketa, double modals, negative inversion, and, in its own way, ain't.

Bailey, of course, intended for the wave model to apply to individuals, in single styles, rather than to groups as has been done here. However, it is nearly impossible to get enough data from individuals when dealing with grammar to show such a wave going across individuals. If enough such data could be obtained, the results would undoubtedly show, for the same variables, but in more detail, the same kinds of stability, innovation, and loss of certain forms shown for working class groups here.

Notes

1. I am grateful to William Labov for his comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2. These explanations were suggested to me by William Labov.

3. According to Bickerton (1975:30,108), Guyanese Creole has a get passive in the basil ect in the form of get + uninflected verb. He suggests that this use of get could be an innovation or borrowing, with the transitive stem form of the verb (standing alone) as the original passive. (Jamaican Creole has only the intransitive stem as the passive. (DeCamp 1971:363)) This point raises the possibility of get passive in American English as originating in and spreading from Black English. See Feagin 1977 for discussion of other possible Creole/Black English influences on Southern White English.

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